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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000238

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [GR](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH LAMENTS "PERSECUTION" OF
TURKEY'S RULING PARTY

REF: A. 07 ISTANBUL 0996
[1](#)B. ANKARA 0326

Classified By: Consul General Sharon A. Wiener for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I discussed his views on the new Archbishop of Athens and the closure case against the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) while updating the Consul General on Patriarchate issues during their May 12 meeting. Bartholomew noted Archbishop Ieronymos is well liked by the Government of Greece (GOG) and represents a welcome warming of relations between the Greek Orthodox Church in Athens and the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Bartholomew expects the AKP closure case to halt prospects of any resolution to Patriarchate concerns in the short term. In the meantime, Archbishop Ieronymos may be able to leverage his good standing in Athens and sympathies for the Ecumenical Patriarchate to set the stage for long term solutions in Ankara. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Consul General called on Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I May 12, a few hours after Greek Orthodox Archbishop Ieronymos II concluded his inaugural visit to the Patriarchate as the new Archbishop of Athens. Noting he was scheduled to depart for Athens himself the following day to receive the Woodrow Wilson Award for Public Service, Bartholomew lauded Ieronymos' appointment, stating it heralds "a new era" in relations between Athens and the seat of the Archbishop of Constantinople, considered the "first among equals" in Christian Orthodoxy. Bartholomew described Ieronymos as ready to cooperate and having much respect for the Ecumenical Patriarchate, in sharp contrast to Ieronymos' predecessor Archbishop Christodoulos. Bartholomew characterized Christodoulos as an overly ambitious leader who "corrupted people in the church morally and financially." He stressed the importance of a unified Greek-speaking Orthodoxy to defend the Ecumenical Patriarchate against challenges from the Russian Orthodox church.

[1](#)3. (C) Responding to Consul General's inquiry concerning Ieronymos' political influence with the government in Athens, Bartholomew stated the GOG was "very happy with him." The new Archbishop knows where to draw the line between church and state and is an authentic, humble leader who is loved by the majority of the Greek nation. Unlike his predecessor who "turned the church upside down," Bartholomew observed Ieronymos began with a low profile and is starting to deal with the essence of church problems. Bartholomew also noted he had agreed to meet with US Ambassador to Greece Speckhard in Athens on May 14.

[1](#)4. (C) Turning to the AKP closure case, Bartholomew said he is sorry to see the "persecution" against the ruling party, noting AKP represented the best course for Turkey. Despite the lack of solutions to the Ecumenical Patriarchate's

concerns -- including, for instance, resolution to the incident involving Ministry of Forestry officials damaging the Church of the Transfiguration on Heybeli Island in November 2007 (ref A) -- Bartholomew believes AKP has demonstrated good intentions, pointing out the Prime Minister recently made positive statements concerning the re-opening of Halki Seminary. Still, he expects no further developments in the short term as AKP concentrates on saving itself. Bartholomew attributed lack of progress on Patriarchate issues to the "deep state," which he equated to the military and the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP).

15. (C) Bartholomew lamented the new Law on Foundations (ref B) was being used to justify the closure case despite its offering "very little" to religious minority communities. The new law does not permit the return of properties associated with foundations that have been taken under the government's administrative control nor does it address the return of, or compensation for, church properties sold to third parties. Bartholomew acknowledged, however, that the clause permitting church foundations to acquire new property is a significant development. The Patriarchal residence for example, had been deeded in his name as a private citizen but will soon be re-registered as a property belonging to the Patriarchate's church foundation.

16. (C) Comment. Though Bartholomew is likely correct that the closure case blocks further GOT attention to Patriarchate concerns in the short term, his assessment of Archbishop Ieronymos holds promise for the long term. For better or worse, the GOT continues to argue its ability to resolve Patriarchate issues depends on the GOG extending rights "in

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parallel" to the Turkish minority in Western Thrace. The new Archbishop of Athens may be able to leverage his positive relations with the GOG to encourage developments that would make it easier for the GOT to act in favor of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. Turkey will need to move beyond its latest round of domestic political brinkmanship before we will know.

End comment.
WIENER